

Social Darwinism

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Resum. El món del saber mai no fou el mateix a partir del 24 de novembre de 1859. Fins i tot, les persones a qui més plau posar èmfasi en la dimensió anònima i col·lectiva de l'avenç científic es veuen obligades a acceptar la fulminant aportació d'una sola i senzilla teoria, l'exposada per Charles Darwin a *L'origen de les espècies*, el 1859. Estudiosos de tots els àmbits van voler incorporar el descobriment del naturalista anglès a les seves pròpies teories. En totes les ciències socials, des de l'etnologia fins a la politologia, des de la sociologia fins a la història, va sorgir l'afany d'incorporar un evolucionisme ajustat a nocions com les de selecció natural, lluita per la vida i supervivència dels més ben dotats, a les interpretacions més científiques de la societat humana. Tanmateix, les teories sociològiques més interessants sobre la dinàmica social posen èmfasi, des de molt abans de Charles Darwin, en la lluita pels recursos escassos, el domini d'uns homes sobre els altres, la consolidació d'èlits, la subordinació de certes classes a d'altres, la marginació o exclusió socials i, naturalment, la guerra, la concurrència econòmica –despietada de vegades– i les lluites que caracteritzen la nostra història des de sempre. La hipòtesi i les explicacions de Darwin van reforçar aquesta vella tradició «conflictivista» d'anàlisi dels assumptes humans. La van enriquir notablement, encara que, en alguns casos, van introduir algunes simplificacions d'estil sociobiològic que la investigació posterior s'ha encarregat de corregir, matisar i superar. Però el darwinisme social no és cosa del passat. Així, durant la llarga fase neoliberal i neoconservadora que ha conduït a la present recessió econòmica, vivíem en un neodarwinisme social vulgar, en el qual els responsables acceptaven les disfuncions de la dinàmica econòmica. Ja és hora de revelar l'enigma que s'amaga en aquest feix complicat, i immensament influent, d'idees que cobreix el darwinisme social. És hora d'assenyalar quines d'elles són perniciosos, acientífiques o enterament falses i quines, sense cap dubte, responen a una agradable aproximació a la sempre inabastable veritat.

Paraules clau: Charles Darwin · darwinisme social · evolucionisme · sociobiologia

Summary. After 24 November 1859, the world of knowledge would never be the same. Even those who prefer to emphasize the anonymous and collective dimension of scientific advances are forced to accept the fulminant contribution of Charles Darwin in his *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859. Thereafter, experts from numerous fields of study sought to incorporate the English naturalist's conclusions into their own theories. Among these were social scientists, from ethnologists to political scientists, from sociologists to historians, all of whom readily adapted the notions of natural selection, the struggle for life, and the survival of the fittest to their own scientific interpretations of the nature of human society. Long before Darwin, however, the most interesting sociological theories on social dynamics strongly emphasized the struggle for scarce resources, the consolidation of elites, the subordination of certain classes to others, social exclusion or marginalization, social harmony as well as the often ruthless and violent competition (for power, territory, etc.) that has always characterized our history. Darwin's work reinforced but also notably enriched discussions of the role of traditional conflicts in the analysis of human matters. While in some cases broader application of evolutionary theory has resulted in a tendency to oversimplifications, further research has generally led to corrections and clarifications. Unfortunately, a vulgar social Darwinism persists. Thus, during the long neoliberal and neoconservative phase that preceded the present economic recession, social neodarwinism, can be seen to have motivated the financial schemes and abuses that ultimately disrupted the economic dynamics of much of the developed world. It is therefore time to re-examine social Darwinism and its enormously influential impact on society. Those aspects which are pernicious, unscientific, or completely false must be distinguished from those which, without a doubt, provide a satisfying approximation of the always unattainable truth.

Keywords: Charles Darwin · social Darwinism · evolutionism · sociobiology

Based on the Distinguished Lecture given by the author at the Institute for Catalan Studies, Barcelona, on 18 June 2009.

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Throughout their history, humans have examined and sought to explain their origins. Even before there was a clear and distinct concept of humanity but only a tribal sense of “us,” humans created an elaborate mythological past. Simplifying greatly, the universal concept of a human race or human species began when the Romans stopped seeing all non-Romans as barbarians but instead regarded them, as they did themselves, i.e., as human beings. The origins of this view can be traced back to Aristotle and to the contributions made first by the Greeks and then by the Romans to stoicism, which provided the theoretical underpinnings of this universalistic notion of humanity. It was only due to the general concept of a human race—in which the distinction between the free individual and the slave or barbarian was abolished—that rigorous, rational, and respectable hypotheses explaining the evolution of our species as such could be constructed. This “untribalization” allowed us to think about ourselves historically and sociologically as a species. While the natural history of the human being is not yet complete, today we know much more about ourselves than ever before.

It is not my intention here to review the course of the difficult path to conceptualize the general evolution of the human race. It is enough to mention that, beginning with the philosophers of the Enlightenment, such as Vico, Condorcet, and Saint-Simon, followed by Comte and Marx, a steady stream of theories has been put forward to describe the structure of human evolution. With the constant progress of the social sciences, these theories have been continuously improved upon, with earlier misconceptions replaced by increasingly plausible ideas based on new data and novel methods of analysis.

However, in looking back at the development of the social sciences and its investigations into human society, there can be no doubt that the sudden appearance of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* had enormous repercussions on the intellectual currents of the times. In the social sciences, Darwin's theory would dramatically reshape the perspective that was being gradually put forward based on observations drawn from archaeology, sociology, physical anthropology, history, and other relevant disciplines.

Indeed, knowledge would not be the same after 1859, the year when *On the Origin of Species* was published. Even those who prefer to emphasize the anonymous and collective dimension of scientific progress are forced to accept the fulminant contribution of Darwin's theory of natural selection. Nonetheless, despite its radical novelty, it is clear that Darwin's work was influenced by the ideas of other, earlier wise men. Thus, *On the Origin of Species* is highly indebted to the social sciences, in particular to the work of Robert Malthus on human populations and its central notion of the struggle for existence. Darwin's work would also be expanded upon, such as by his esteemed friend, the sociologist Herbert Spencer, author of *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, published in 1871. It was Spencer who coined the phrase “survival of the fittest.” Modern evolutionism is rooted in the work of great philosophers such as Benito de Spinoza, in the 17th century, as well as in the aforementioned Giambattista Vico (Fig. 1).

The debt owed by Darwin's dazzling theory to ideas of the

past was settled immediately, due to its enormous impact. Experts from numerous fields of study were quick to recognize the broader relevance of the process of natural selection. While the story that Karl Marx wanted to dedicate *The Capital* to Darwin is mainly unfounded, it is true that Friedrich Engels, in comparing the significance of Marxism to that of Darwinism, admitted his immense admiration of Darwin. The admiration for Darwin's contribution became evident in all the social sciences, from ethnology to politics and from sociology to history, as it became clear that the components of evolutionism, i.e., natural selection, the struggle for existence, and the survival of the fittest, could provide a highly scientific interpretation of human society (Fig. 2). In retrospect, we view this desire with slight skepticism but without completely rejecting its intentions. Instead, we have altered evolutionism to reach a sociological neoevolutionism that is more cautious, more rigorous, and more ambitious, and which has produced several noteworthy contributions to our understanding of human societies.

The vision of human society as inherently conflictive is very old. The most interesting sociological theories of social dynamics highlighted, long before Charles Darwin, the struggle for scarce resources, the consolidation of elites, the subordination of certain classes to others, social exclusion or marginalization, social harmony as well as the often ruthless and violent competition (for power, territory, etc.) that has always characterized our history. Darwin's work strengthened and provided the context for the long-held “conflictivist” view of human affairs. Thus, it remarkably enriched it, although in some cases this led to sociobiological oversimplifications that only later were clarified and revised.

To some extent, part of the impact of revolutionary contributions such as those made by Darwin—and later by Marx and Freud—lies in the almost inevitable ease with which the ideas contained within them are transformed and degraded to mere ideology. Just as the message of Saint Matthew's gospel could not prevent the horrors of the Inquisition, Darwin's theory has long been abused by industrialists, predators of virgin lands, weapons manufacturers, etc., based on the justification that wealth and pre-eminence are the result of natural superiority in the struggle for life and that exploitation is the inevitable consequence of natural selection. In recent history, this view was carried to its extremes by fascist elements who defined themselves as an elite class superior to the rest of society and therefore justified in their destruction of democracy. This abuse marked the descent of vulgar forms of social Darwinism—which has nothing to do with social science—into hell. Nor was it limited to one end of the political spectrum, as evidenced, for example, by the socialist left in Scandinavia and their defense of eugenics, whose ravages should not be forgotten.

Unfortunately, however, while the most obvious forms of vulgar social Darwinism have been condemned by most governments it is not a relic of the past. Instead, it can be seen to have persisted, surfacing, in latent and unmentionable form, during the recent neoliberal and neoconservative phases that today have landed most of the world in severe economic recession. Many of the actions taken by those entrusted with political and financial responsibility were based upon vulgar social

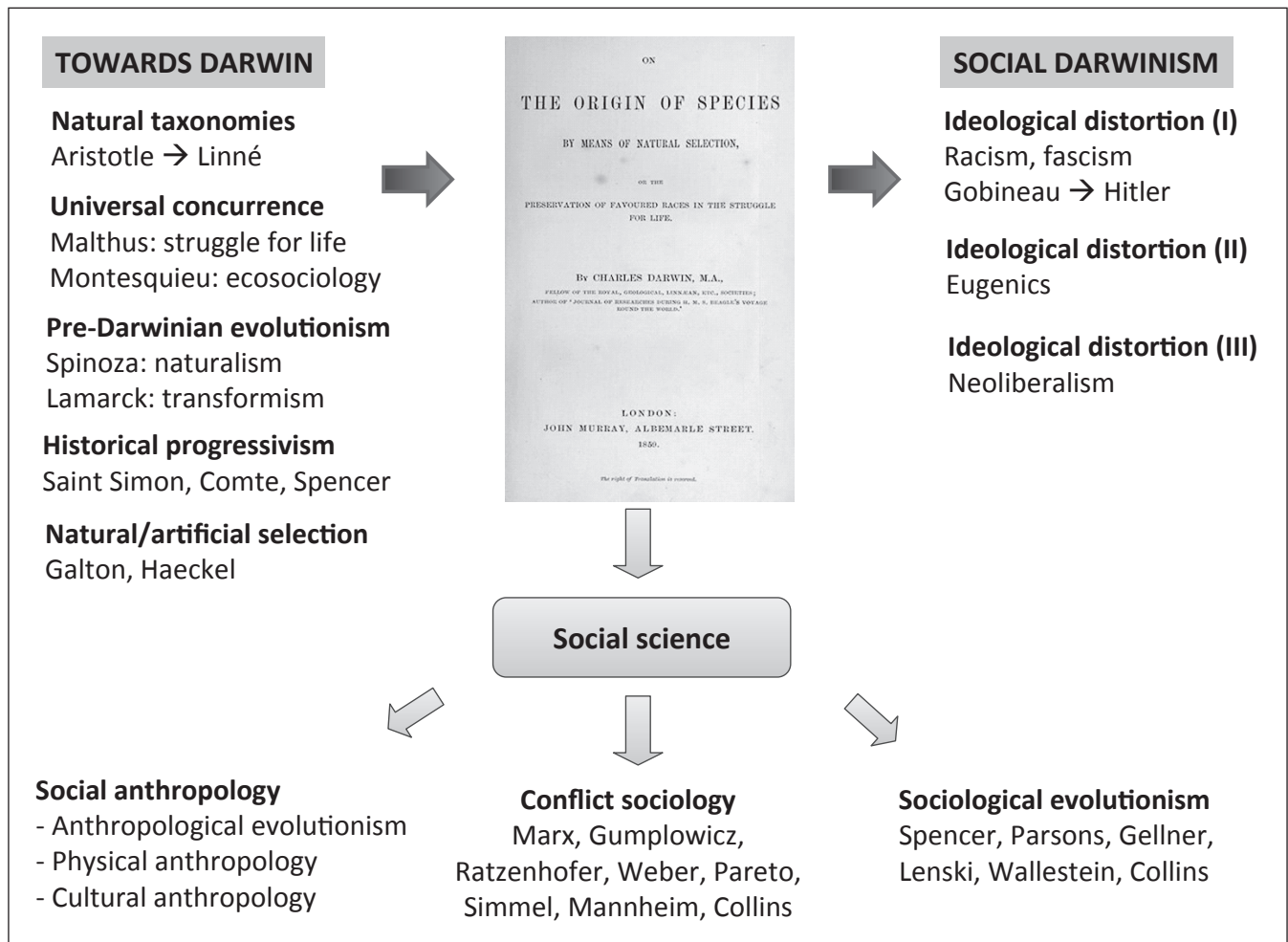


Fig. 1. Intellectual influences and repercussions of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*.

Darwinism, such that responsible people refused to admit the dysfunctions of leadership and of the international banking system but instead blindly accepted the chain of events as a presumably natural process in which the most competitive, most gifted, most powerful, and most effective were assured of winning. This view failed to consider the need to address, by moral imperative, the injustices of the world and the inequality of opportunities suffered by most of the human race.

It is therefore time to re-examine social Darwinism and its enormously influential impact on society. Those aspects which are pernicious, unscientific, or completely false must be distinguished from those which, without a doubt, provide a satisfying approximation of the always unattainable truth. In the 21st century, many efforts are being made to free social Darwinism from mythology and pseudoscientific eschatology and to instead elaborate a structured vision and logic, always founded upon a well-examined interpretation of the data.

Evolutionist sociology has, today, few cultivators, but there are nonetheless several extraordinary individuals whose aim is

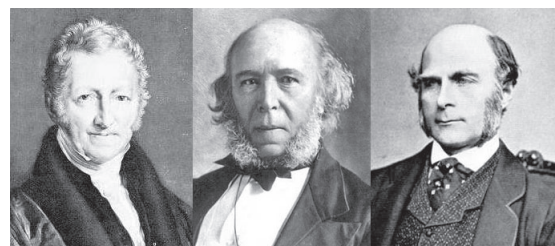


Fig. 2. Thomas Malthus, Herbert Spencer, and Francis Galton, notable social Darwinists.

to interpret the history of humanity, in terms of its development, recognizing the transition of the human race from a universe of signs, common to all animals, to a universe of symbols, exclusive to our species.

From here, I can only invite readers to explore that which has been carried out and continues to be carried out by contemporary social neoevolutionists. The outcome of their efforts can be readily accessed by all—in the best bookshops.

About the author

Salvador Giner, president of the Institute for Catalan Studies, has a degree and a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Chicago, a degree in Law from the University of Barcelona, and a Ph.D. in Law (Sociology) from the Autonomous University of Barcelona. He did his postgraduate studies at the University of Cologne. He is professor emeritus of the University of Barcelona. He has been a professor at several American and European universities: Cambridge, Lancaster, London, Rome, Pavia, Chicago and Mexico, among others. He published *Sociologia*, which has been translated from Catalan into many languages. His first book, published in 1961, *La societat de masses*, was released first in Catalan and later expanded and translated into English (New York and London) and Spanish (Barcelona). The essay *L'estructura social de la llibertat* appeared in 1971 and has subsequently been developed and published in other

languages. In 1985, he published a group of essays on the nature and dynamics of culture *Comunió, domini, innovació* (most of these were later translated into English, Spanish and Italian). He is the author of the study *La societat catalana* (winner of the award from the Association of Professional Economists of Catalonia, 2000) and director and author of the *Enquesta de la Regió Metropolitana de Barcelona* of 2003. He was director and co-author of *La cultura catalana: el sagrat i el profà* (1996) and co-authored *La governabilitat i l'esdevenidor de les societats modernes* (1990). He wrote *Carta sobre la democràcia* (1996) and was co-author of *Manual de civisme* (1998), all in Catalan and translated into several languages. He collaborated from the very beginning in the publication of journals, such as *Serra d'Or*, and is a frequent contributor to Catalan newspapers. He was one of the founders of the Catalan Sociological Association, filial society of the Institute for Catalan Studies since 1979, and its president on two oc-

casions. He founded and presided over the Spanish Sociological Association and has been a member of the Executive Committee of the International Sociological Association, and cofounder of the European Sociological Association. He was director and founder of the CSIC's Institute of Advanced Social Studies (Barcelona, Madrid, Cordoba), and director of the Department of Sociology at Brunel West London and at the University of Barcelona. Some of the major distinctions he has received are: the *Creu de Sant Jordi* (Saint George's Cross) in 1995, the National Award of Sociology and Political Science from the Center for Sociological Investigations (2006), and the National Award for Social Sciences (Madrid, 2008). He has an honorary degree (*honoris causa*) from the University of Valencia (Venezuela) and is a permanent member of the Scientific Committee of the European Amalfi Prize for Sociology and Social Sciences (an Italian award) and of the international seminar that accompanies it.